Ask an Expert: Six Tips to Make Your World Less Noisy

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The National Institutes of Health, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, sponsors a program called “It’s a Noisy Planet – Protect Their Hearing.” This campaign battles noise-induced hearing loss, which occurs when tiny sensory cells in the inner ear are damaged by sounds that are too loud and last too long. This type of hearing loss can be permanent, but it is preventable – especially at home when all family members work to keep noise levels down. Consider these tips:

* Parents can monitor the volume of electronic devices youth have plugged into earbuds. Some devices will show a warning on the screen if the volume is at a dangerous level. Another way to monitor volume is if someone walking by can hear music or game sounds coming from the earbuds. If so, the volume is dangerously high.

* Keep earplugs or sound-reducing headsets on hand to use when yard/garden equipment, motorcycles, ATVs and loud diesel engines are running.

* Create ways to muffle the noise of chores. An example is to close the door between family members and appliances in use, such as those in a workshop or laundry room.

* Buy quiet toys. If you buy electronic toys, choose those with volume controls and only use the lowest volume setting.

* Ask about the noise rating when buying certain appliances and equipment, such as a range hood, dishwasher, lawnmower or trimmers. Some ratings are given in “sones,” and the lower the sone number, the quieter the unit.

* Keep outdoor noises outdoors, especially if your home is in a noisy location. To do this, caulk cracks around windows and doors, keep windows closed, keep garage doors shut and install triple-pane windows and storm doors.

Sometimes we live with noise for so long, we get used to it and it seems normal. Unfortunately, many of the noises we are exposed to on a regular basis are at damaging levels. We may not realize we have been around loud noises for long periods of time until someone asks us why we are speaking so loudly.

How loud is too loud? Consider the following examples of noise levels measured in decibels. The first level, if experienced regularly for more than 1 minute at or above 110 decibels, can cause permanent hearing loss. This includes firecrackers or shotgun firing, 140-165 decibels; jet taking off, 140 decibels; and ambulance siren, 120 decibels.

The next level also includes sounds that are potentially damaging to hearing. To protect hearing, no more than 15 minutes of unprotected exposure to noises at or above 100 decibels is recommended. These include such things as: personal stereo at maximum level, 105 decibels; woodshop, 100 decibels; and snowmobile, 100 decibels.

The last potentially harmful group carries the warning to have no more than 15 minutes of unprotected exposure to noises at or above 85 decibels to prevent gradual hearing loss. These include power mowers, 90 decibels; heavy city traffic, 85 decibels; and school cafeteria, 85 decibels. Prolonged exposure to any noise at or above 85 decibels can cause gradual hearing loss.

So, what is considered a safe level of noise at home? Normal conversation is typically at 60 decibels and the refrigerator is at 40 decibels.

We are all exposed to a variety of noises every day, but home can be a place where high levels of noise are minimized. Protection comes from lowering the volume, moving away from loud sounds, minimizing the amount of noise that comes into the home from outside and wearing hearing protectors such as earplugs or earmuffs.

For further information, visit the “It’s a Noisy Planet” campaign website at https://www.noisyplanet.nidcd.nih.gov/.